

Reading Romans Well: Some Things to Keep in Mind

1. Pay attention to the “diatribe” style of the argument.

Through much of Romans, Paul uses an ancient rhetorical technique called diatribe. This is basically a question and answer approach to structuring your thoughts. Point out some examples in the text of Romans.

What this means for you and me is that if we want to read Romans well, we have to pay attention to what question he’s answering when he is using this approach. This will help us track with him and keep us from attempting to make him answer our questions rather than his own.

2. Keep the “people of God” at the forefront.

That is, when reading Romans, don’t make the primary thing your own personal salvation. Obviously that is very important and we enter into it individually. But that is not the main point of the argument of Romans. Romans is not about justification by faith. It is about how God has formed His people composed of Jews and Gentiles and that the line of demarcation is faith. Thus justification by faith enters in.

The real issue in Romans is not, How do I get saved? The real issue, according to Gordon Fee, is either:

- a. Gentiles being accepted as full members of the people of God, OR
- b. Jewish Christians not being rejected by Gentiles, even if they are still observing the Torah.

Either way, the focus is on what marks out the people of God and who can be admitted and then how to live together as that people.

3. Remember that in Romans “works” is usually short for “works of the Law,” which refers to doing the Torah.

It is not necessarily about people trying to earn their salvation by keeping the OT. So the contrast between faith and works is not a contrast between earning and not earning or effort and non-effort. It is a contrast between the necessity and/or advantage of living by Torah (=Old Covenant) and living by faith in the Messiah to be right with God. This leads then to the fourth suggestion for reading Romans well.

It is terribly important that we modern Christians don’t run down the Torah by saying it was a system of earning your salvation or a system of rules; and since people couldn’t keep all the rules and earn their salvation God sent Jesus. Unfortunately, that caricature is all too common in our churches. But that is not what the OT says about itself (read it!) and that’s not what the Jews of

Paul's day in general believed. Perhaps there were some who thought that way (aren't there some Christians who seem to think that way?), but in general, Jews in the first century weren't trying to earn their salvation by keeping the Torah. They were saved and were God's people via a gracious act of God and they believed that the Torah is what marked them out as that and showed them the way to live as the people of God.

4. **Keep in mind the chronological or historical framework = "what time it is"**

Much of what is said about the people of God and works of the Law reflects the new era the coming of Christ and the Spirit has inaugurated. The time of Torah is over. The Old Covenant is completed and the New Covenant has come. By faith, then, come one, come all—Jew and Gentile—just as promised to Abraham and through the prophets. Galatians 3 is a condensed form of the same point.

We need to keep in mind the overall narrative framework of the Bible:

creation→fall→promise to Abe→exodus→Israel→Israel's fall and exile→Messiah→second exodus→people of God in the Messiah

Thus to restate: Paul has been made aware of the situation in the church in Rome by friends and visitors he has received, especially of some tension among the churches, so he writes to speak his passion into that situation, *namely that there is one people of God marked out by faith in Christ not by Torah.*